RISE AND SHINE
Isaiah 60:1-5
January 6, 1980 - Communion

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

New Year's Eve always had a certain mystery for me. As a child I was never quite sure what to believe about it.I knew that the calendar changed, that the designation of the year increased by one digit and that everyone was working very hard at celebrating. I rather enjoyed the opportunity to stay up and celebrate whatever everyone else was celebrating. To my questions about what, really, was going on, my father told me that as one year ended and another began, I could - if I watched very carefully - see the space between them. I watched for several years for that space. In a sense, I guess I still do, wondering what really is going on at midnight.

The overwhelming spirit of the event in the past has been happy, positive, optimisti Words of Alfred Lord Tennyson were put to music in the last century in what is the only New Year's hymn with which I am acquainted. It defines the reason for New Year's celebration...

"Ring out, wild bells, to a wild sky,
The flying cloud, the frosty light;
The year is dying in the night,
Ring out, wild bells and let him die.

"Ring out the old, ring in the new.
Ring, happy bells, across the snow;
The year is going, let him go.
Ring out the false, ring in the true."

That's quite an assertion - that the past is false and the future true.

Tennyson's prose is a catalog of past optimism and a good description of the reason people celebrated New Year's...

"Ring out the feud of rich and poor,
Ring in redress to all mankind.
Ring out the thousand years of war,
Ring in the thousand years of peace.

"Ring out false pride in peace and blood
Ring in the love of truth and right
Ring in the common love of good."

The poet captured the universal sense that human history is a progression, a noble quest, that things are getting better, that the future will be a better time, in every way, than the past. That's why people have always celebrated the passing of time and the changing of the year.

As I observed the first five days of this one, however, I was reminded of a two-liner Ogden Nash once wrote on December 31...

"Hark, it's midnight, children dear.
Duck! Here comes another year."

Watching the frantic crowd in Times Square on New Year's Eve, I couldn't help but ask - "What in the world are they celebrating?" Ogden Nash's advice is appropriate - we should be looking for cover.

There is remarkable unanimity among scholars, intellectuals, journalists at this point in time. All believe that something fundamental has changed, and is changing, in the world. James Reston alluded to it in his year-end editorial about the mood of Washington. He observed, "What is bothering people in both parties here is the world changed faster in the 70's than we have been able to change ourselves...that the prevailing assumptions of our people, our government and our institutions are out of date."

Time's Essay "Epitaph for a Decade" talked about the fact that somewhere between Vietnam, Watergate, the Energy Crisis, and Iran things will never be the same. Robert Middleton, in a paper on the future writes..."The assumptions which were once an unquestioned part of existence have been transformed into questions..." (The Ministry, December/January 1980).

What are these commentators talking about? Where precisely, are the changes taking place? Well, for one thing, most of us grew up believing in material progress - that is if we worked harder we'd get ahead. And the simple fact is that for the vast majority of Americans, 1980 will not be better - but worse, financially - regardless of how hard they worked. Paul Volker is saying the unthinkable - our standard of living may have to recede a bit. Most of us grew up believing in the invincibility of our nation and suddenly we have to come to terms with the fact that we are not invincible - we're not even independent. We are dependent on the whims of oil producing nations. There are many other instances of fundamental change, but beneath them all I think is a brewing theological crisis. Where in the world is that benevolent man upstairs we thought had things firmly in hand? Where in the world is God in this mess? Emile Zola one time described the human situation as follows: "Human history is like a train hurtling through the darkness. The track is fate: the freight is humanity; the engineer is God, who is dead." For many people that grim vision seems very close to the truth.

Today is Epiphany Sunday. There is no historical evidence for it, but church tradition has always celebrated the arrival of the Magi at Bethlehem, following their star, on this date. It is "Twelfth Night" the official end of Christmastide. Its symbols are that mysterious star, the Magi and their curious pilgrimage and, in a sense, that deeper Biblical assertion that God, in sovereign freedom, chooses all sorts of ways to work His will in human history.

As the Magi followed a star into an unknown future so the church on Epiphany remembers its oldest, similar stories. "Arise, shine, for your light has come!" Those words were written by a prophet five and one half centuries before Christ, to a group of people for whom the future could not have looked more dismal. A generation before they had been captured as their nation was defeated and overrun by the Babylonians. The victors had carried them off, back to Babylon and then had instigated a very effective form of genocide. Instead of concentration camps and slave labor the Hebrews were welcomed, encouraged to settle in, get jobs, participate in the culture, worship Babylonian gods. As a new generation was born, a generation of young people who had never been in Judah, never seen the Temple, the Babylonian idea of assimilation began to make sense. The Jews were in danger of disappearing.

The prophet who wrote to them looked around the world of the Middle East, saw political ferment in Persia under the firm hand of Cyrus. He had the audacity to call Cyrus the servant of God. He had the greater audacity to suggest that God would act in a way to redeem His people, even in this depressing set of circumstances. He was no Pollyanna. His image of Judah as a violated woman, lying in the gutter, is very harsh. It is to that woman that he addresses the words "Arise, shine". Her children are returning, her poverty will become wealth. At the very moment when things could not have looked worse, the prophet suggested that God was active, present and doing something redemptive for His people.

In the process the prophet was working out the radical theology of Judaism and Christianity; namely, that God is God; that He is not toppled from power when His people are defeated; that His will is majestic and mysterious and that nothing in history will thwart it forever; and that He will use the events of human history, and the people of human history to reconcile and redeem and save. That is why we spend so much time with the prophet around Christmas time. That's what Bethlehem means: God using human history God making His grand entrance onto the stage of history through the totally human event of birth. It is precisely when human history is not doing so well on its own, when the human spirit is sagging, when things do not look so good - that the message of Christmas makes the most sense and is most clearly heard and understood.

Christmas Eve 1943 Dietrich Bonhoeffer was in a Nazi prison cell and he wrote words which I regard as very important: "For a Christian there is nothing peculiarly difficult about Christmas in a prison cell. I dare say that it will have more meaning and be celebrated with greater sincerity here in this prison than in the places where all that survives of the feast is its name...that God should come down to the very place which men usually abhor, that Christ was born in a stable...these are things that a prisoner can understand better than anybody else. For him the Christmas story is glad tidings in a very real sense." (Letters and Papers from Prison, p.77-78).

Carl Sandburg once asked in a poem, "Why the story of star silver and pine green never wears out?" The reason is here. The story suggests that there is hope; not just when that portion of human history we happen to be living is proceeding nicely, but precisely when the reverse is true. There is hope, even when things are falling apart at the seams; when there is no room in the inn, or when the oil is running out; when the captives are in Babylon or the American Embassy in Tehran; when Herod is slaughtering the innocents or the Russians are invading Afghanistan. There is hope.

The story never wears out because it makes the most important promise in the world; namely, that God comes quietly, but relentlessly into human life; that He will live our lives with us, that He will stand with us; that He will give us strength, courage and faith in our time of need; that He will come into whatever future there will be and that therefore we can walk into it - head high, courageously, briskly, almost jauntily.

I do not say that lightly. Nor does the Bible. The future may not be what we want. Tragedy will happen. Sickness, death, pain, loneliness, despair - some of us will walk through it all. All of us will walk through some of it. The promise is that God will meet our need. That He will be in it with us. That in ways as human and common as bread broken and a cup shared, God will be with us.

Rise and Shine. Ring out the old, ring in the new -
Our light has come indeed.

Amen.

God of all nations, God of all time and eternity, as a new year beginning, call out of us that steady faith of Your people in the past. Help us to see Your hand at work; help us to trust Your providence; and walk with us in days ahead; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.